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NATIONAL FIRE PLAN EFFORTS SUPPORT HISTORIC MILL

The first sawmill in Tooele County was established in 1851. More than 150 years later, a descendent of the pioneer who established that mill is cutting wood on the same spot. Jay Fitzwater is a restoration specialist at the historic Benson Grist Mill just north of Stansbury, but he refers to himself as a sawyer. "A sawyer needs something to saw," says Fitzwater. "I'm always on the lookout for wood and the Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands has sent me a real present."

A National Fire Plan project in Big Cottonwood Canyon has generated several truckloads of usable timber, all destined for Fitzwater's saw. "It's a real win-win situation," said Wasatch Front Area Manager Barbara Gardner. "As our crews thin hazardous fuels the timber that's not wanted in the canyon finds a good use at the historic Benson Mill."

The National Fire Plan was instituted in 2000, following a landmark wildland fire season. Part of that plan is the removal of hazardous fuels to reduce the intensity and size of wildfires. Wildland fire requires three elements: heat, oxygen and fuel. "We can't manage heat and oxygen," said Gardner, "But, we can remove hazardous fuels and make them unavailable should fire make an appearance."

Gardner and Fitzwater first met when Fitzwater was mayor of the town of Rush Valley and served on the volunteer fire department. Working at the Benson Mill is Fitzwater's retirement project. "I enjoy helping young people discover the beauty of the wood inside an old dirty log," said Fitzwater. "I built the sawmill myself and the wood produced from it finds its way into our historic buildings or other projects here at the mill."

Federal, state and local agencies are conducting National Fire Plan projects throughout the state. The project in Big Cottonwood Canyon involves the creation of a fuel break, as well as thinning some overgrown areas.

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